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# Cinema in Canada

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# Cinema in Canada

by Martin Delisle

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### *Note about the author*

Martin Delisle has a diploma in visual arts from the University of Ottawa (1973) and in cinema technique from Algonquin College, Ottawa (1975). He has worked as a film maker and freelance photographer since 1976. He did the camera work for *J'ai besoin d'un nom* (1978) and *Un homme à sa fenêtre* (1980), produced by the National Film Board, Toronto Region, and for three programs broadcast by Radio-Quebec in 1983.

Since 1977, Mr. Delisle has been film critic for the Société Radio-Canada, in Ottawa and is at present a member of the administrative council of l'Association québécoise des critiques de cinéma.

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## Introduction

Canadian cinema is surprisingly young compared with cinema in other countries. While this might seem strange for a wealthy country like Canada, it is certainly not for lack of technical or human means, nor even imagination or ambition. The main reason is obvious: it lies to the south of us on the map. Hollywood, USA, with the monopoly that its enormous film-making machine has created, is clearly the reason why it is difficult to produce and distribute Canadian films for Canadians. History may have been quite different if Louis B. Mayer, Jack Warner, Mary Pickford, Mack Sennett, Norma Shearer and Glenn Ford — to name only some of the Canadian-born celebrities absorbed by the United States film industry — had remained in Canada.

Comfort can be taken in the knowledge that the situation is changing.

### *The early years*

Most historians agree that the first important year in the history of Canadian cinema was 1896, when illusionist John C. Greent produced a film on Jimmy Hardy's tightrope walk across Niagara Falls. The same year, 19-year-old Léo-Ernest Ouimet was attracted by a seven-minute film screened in a small room in Montreal. This was the first film of its kind in Canada. The first film shown in Ottawa, *The Kiss*, took place in the West End Park in July 1896. Gradually, as circuses acquired projection equipment, film showings became increasingly popular.

The first film made by a partnership was produced by Edison Studios for the Massey-Harris Company of Canada in 1898 and was screened that summer at Toronto's Canadian National Exhibition.

L. Ernest Ouimet opened the first deluxe cinema in Montreal in 1907, eight years prior to the opening of the Strand cinema in New York. The "Ouimetoscope" had 1 000 seats, its walls were covered with Chinese ceramics and the lighting was filtered. The total investment was \$130 000, a very large sum at that time. Admission was 10 cents for matinées and from 25 and 50 cents for evening performances, depending on the seat\*, which could even be reserved. Ouimet brought in films from New York and

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\*The average price of admission today is \$4.75

showed newsreels that he produced himself.

*Evangeline*, the first truly Canadian feature film, was produced by the Canadian Bioscope Company of Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1913. In 1917, the first Canadian studio was established by Canadian National Features Ltd., in Trenton, Ontario.

The years from 1912 to 1918 were marked by a considerable increase in film production. With the formation of the War Office Cinematographic Committee, high quality material was provided for films on the war in Europe. Canada's natural resources and industries were extolled by the Exhibit and Publicity Bureau, founded as part of the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce in 1918. In April 1923, this organization became the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau (CGMPB), the forerunner of the National Film Board (NFB).

While the films sold by the Bureau in Canada and abroad, during its initial years, were too often abundant in the wheat fields, salmon fishing, waterfalls and rivers that became the Canadian stereotype, these subjects earned the CGMPB a good reputation until about 1931. The advent of talking films and the budget restrictions of the Depression years, which prevented the Bureau from buying adequate equipment, caused its image to dim. In 1934, when the Bureau was finally able to produce talking films, it was too late and Canada was no longer in the running for quality documentaries.

In 1923, Ouimet became involved in film making and, with his friend and director Paul Cazeneuve, made a few productions including *Why Get Married*, which obtained a measure of success and was even distributed in Europe. In 1928, Bruce Bairnsfather made *Carry On Sergeant*, produced by Canadian International Film Limited, at the exorbitant cost of half a million dollars. The film was a failure because it was silent at a time when "talkies" had become fashionable. In 1927, the Associated Screen News was established in Montreal. Its main achievement, the *Canadian Cameo* series, directed by Gordon Sparling, included some 85 films, the most noteworthy of which were: *Grey Owl's Little Brother* (1932), *Rhapsody in Two Languages* (1934), and *Acadian Spring Song* (1935).

The films depicting Canada produced by the government soon became an integral part of the United States distribution network and fulfilled their function well, attracting currency and tourists. American companies were encouraged to make films in Canada in the hope that they would give the world a more accurate picture of Canada, and would boost the national economy while doing so. But there was no thought of protecting the fledgling Canadian film industry. The privately-owned film industry chafed at the United States' control of 90 per cent of the market consisting of

Britain and its dominions. In the minds of the American distributors, Canada was part of the "home" market. Resistance was attempted but, without government intervention, nothing more than symbolic gestures could be made. The future of a national cinema appeared jeopardized, especially since other problems such as censorship existed in some provinces, as well as the cultural difference between English and French Canada.

*Carry on Sergeant, 1928*





## The National Film Board of Canada

In November 1937 Vincent Massey, the Canadian High Commissioner in London, sent to Prime Minister Mackenzie King's government a report pointing out the inadequacies of the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau and the dwindling popularity of its films among the British public. He urged the government to contact John Grierson, one of the founders of the English documentary school and director of the General Post Office Film Unit in Britain and to bring him to Canada to assess the status of production. Arriving in Canada in May 1938, Grierson worked feverishly, submitting a 60-page report by the end of June. It recommended the creation of a new government production agency to advise the government on film policy and to co-ordinate the production and distribution of films.

Grierson returned to Canada in November 1938 for preparation of the bill that was passed in May 1939 creating the National Film Board. In October 1939, he accepted the position of government film commissioner and chairman of the National Film Board. The Board comprised eight federal government-appointed members, three from the Public Service the other five from private industry and various regions of Canada. While the CGMPB operated under the auspices of a department, the National Film Board was an agency that headed the production and distribution of films for all departments. In June 1941 the CGMPB and the National Film Board were combined.

The essential role of this organization was to make Canada known to Canadians and non-Canadians, and Grierson actively set out to do so. He imported a few film makers from England to train Canadians in the technique of making the news film. These included Stuart Legg, Tom Daly and Norman McLaren, to name a few. He also invited Joris Ivens, one of the masters of documentary cinema, and Alexandre Alexeieff, whose reputation in film animation techniques had earned him wide renown.

Thus, under the auspices of the Wartime Information Board, to which it was attached during the war, but above all under the direction of John Grierson, the National Film Board built its reputation on production in support of the war effort of Canada and its allies. Two important series were *World in Action* and *Canada Carries On*. *Churchill's Island*, one of the



films in this series, obtained Canada's first Oscar in Hollywood in 1941. These films, ten to 20 minutes long, were from film footage made in the countries involved in the war, with original material added in some cases. *World in Action* ended in 1947, while *Canada Carries On* lasted until 1959. Also worthy of note were Norman McLaren's animated shorts, which while exhibiting the brilliant technique of drawing on the film itself, also delivered propaganda messages (*V for Victory*, *Hen Hop*, etc.). Some films were produced in French. This was new, because the CGMPB had not gone very far in that direction. Under Grierson, the number of productions rapidly increased to between 300 and 400 yearly.

Grierson left at the end of the war and, with him, went the British film makers, their mission accomplished; the Canadians they had trained were now ready to fly solo. A few remained, one of whom was, fortunately, Norman McLaren. The National Film Board owes much of its wide acclaim today to the genius of this film animator.

After the war, the NFB underwent a rather troubled period as, among other problems, its financial management came under criticism. In June 1950 a new act was passed redefining the role of the NFB, developing it and making it more effective. When television came on the scene in 1952, the NFB began producing series such as *On the Spot*, *Perspective* and, in French, *Passe-Partout*.

The advent of the small screen ushered in productions in French. Although Grierson saw the importance of French and made recommendations accordingly, up till then most of the French films were dubbed English versions. Also the scenarios proposed by the French film makers had to be written in English. The rural and traditional aspect of French Canadian life was the subject matter of the original French films. The series made for French television was believed to depict life in Quebec more than French Canadian life in other parts of the country.

This was the beginning of *québécois* cinema. NFB's move from Ottawa to Montreal contributed to its development. Michel Brault, Georges Dufaux, Marcel Carrière and others, who had worked for the *Candid Eye* series, were instrumental in bringing in a new genre called "cinéma direct". Gone was the heavy visual and sound equipment, as film makers now could shoulder their cameras and strap on their tape recorders, using synchronous sound as they mingled with people, catching them in real-life situations. This paved the way for the emergence of cinema with a social message which would become the hallmark of Quebec cinema and which coincided with direct cinema. Its first tangible product was *Les Raquetteurs*, a short film co-produced by Gilles Groulx, Michel Brault and

Marcel Carrière in 1958. While the direct cinema movement officially ended in 1965, its influence continued to be felt for some time.

A completely autonomous French section was established in the NFB in 1964, followed by a French animation film section in 1966. At first, fiction films were not encouraged. *Le Chat dans le Sac*, by Gilles Groulx, and *La Vie Heureuse de Leopold Z*, by Gilles Carle, were made almost in secret. The creation of the Société de développement de l'industrie du cinéma canadien (SDICC) attracted a large number of French film makers to the private sector. The NFB, however, continued to produce feature films in French and English.

There was no lack of English production at the NFB, as evidenced by the work of Donald Brittain, George Kaczender, Don Owen, Wolf Koenig, Roman Kroitor and others. But, having already been established for some time, English production continued to develop more quietly. It had one thing in common with French production: its documentalist approach, even in the case of fictional films, which is one of the distinctive traits of Canadian cinema.

In 1968 the "Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle" program began. Financed equally by the NFB and federal departments, this program sought to promote persons, minorities and masses and their own affairs through modern communication. This would lead to a large number of films dealing with social charge and influence in which the film maker was considerably involved.

In recent years the NFB has become increasingly involved in joint productions of feature films with private industry. This was the case with *The Wars* by Robin Phillips and *Le crime d'Ovide Plouffe*, by Denys Arcand, among others.

The NFB has a very wide distribution network in Canada and overseas which gives the public access to a large selection of 16 millimetre films. The NFB recently entered the video market, making several of its productions available on various sizes of video tape. The NFB earned international recognition for the quality of its films — it has been awarded some 1 400 trophies and mentions in international festivals — and has served as an example and training ground for many foreign film makers who have subsequently returned home and improved the film industry in their own countries.

Finally, although the NFB is financed by the Canadian government, it is an independent government agency. The programming committees for English and French productions, composed mainly of directors, decide on film projects in their sectors. The federal government exercises no control over content unless it commissions a specific film.

## The private film industry

The private film industry has vied with the NFB with varying degrees of success, since its inception.

Crawley Films, which was started in Ottawa in 1939, became one of Canada's major production firms. It was purchased in 1981 by a company specializing in animation films. The company made some excellent productions such as *The Loon's Necklace*, 1948, a short illustration of an Indian legend, by F.R. and Judith Crawley, and *Newfoundland Scene*, a documentary by F.R. Crawley, 1951. More recently, it produced *Janis* and *The Man Who Skied Down Mount Everest*, which won an Oscar for the best documentary in 1976.

In 1945 and 1948, a few studios were built in the Quebec City and Toronto regions. Designed for the production of feature films, they were not used much and were remodelled in the early Fifties for television and publicity films. Fédor Ozep, a Russian, by birth, was hired by Renaissance

*Janis*, 1974





Films and, in 1945, produced *Le père Chopin*, the first Canadian fiction film in original French. The company was purchased shortly afterwards by J.A. De Sève, the president of France-Films, the only Canadian distribution firm for French films. Renaissance Films and Quebec Productions Corporation made a series of melodramas that ended about 1954, which were a great success with Quebec audiences.

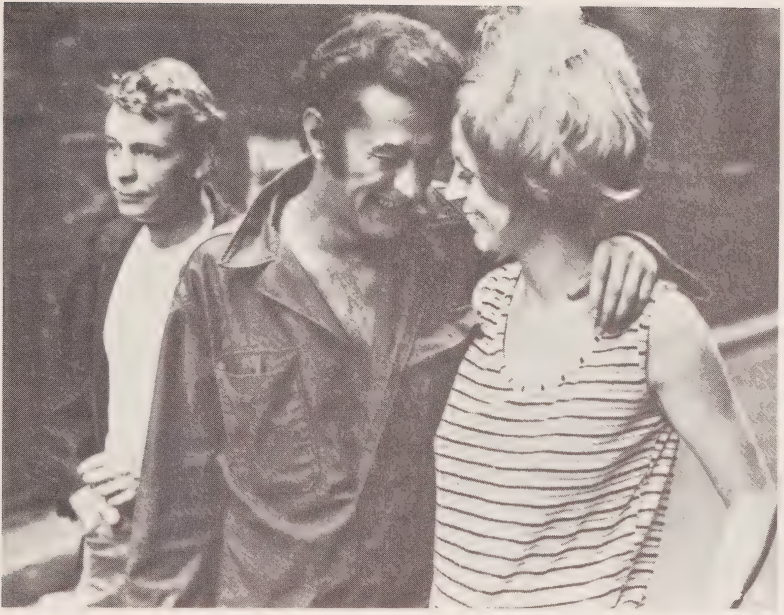
Only 21 films were produced independently in Canada from 1945 to 1955, 14 in French.

Twenty-one films in ten years is not much. But the distribution structures were not conducive to national production: Paramount of the United States controlled 390 theatres, and Rank, a British company with American shareholders, 100 others. Movie-goers did not have much of a choice. They either had to watch American movies, most of them grade "B", or French ones. This situation was responsible for the large network of film clubs, at least in Quebec, where it was possible to discover international cinema.

Little occurred in private film production from 1955 to 1963. Most of the activity was in television or with the National Film Board, where a generation of film makers was learning its trade. Television was a major training ground for the English-speaking directors. For example, Paul Almond worked for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) before directing *Isabel* in 1967, the first film he made for a movie theatre, which was so successful that he was able to carry on. The same was true for Allan King, who drew much inspiration from the techniques used in the NFB's *Candid Eye* series when he directed *Warrendale* in 1967 and *A Married Couple* in 1969, which made his reputation. They were considered to be "fiction-documentary" films. Don Shebib was one of the CBC's best directors of documentaries before he became involved in fiction film. Some of his own experiences are related in *Goin' Down the Road*, 1970.

In 1962, the Association professionnelle des cinéastes was founded in Quebec. Its first president was Claude Jutra. The following year was marked by an important event in the history of Canadian film making: the Montreal International Film Festival included four Canadian feature films on its program. This was the beginning. Two of the films — *A Tout Prendre* by Claude Jutra and *Trouble Fête* by Pierre Patry — were from the private industry. The other two were from the NFB: *Pour la suite du monde* by Pierre Perrault and Michel Brault, and *Drylanders* by Donald Haldane. A start had finally been made!

Private production really came into its own with the creation of the Canadian Film Development Corporation (which is described below). The



*Goin' Down the Road, 1970*

CFDC assisted in the financing of some 80 films from 1968 to 1973. While some mistakes were made the film makers were given an opportunity to create. The names of Gilles Carle, Claude Jutra, Don Shebib, Claude Fournier and others suddenly gained international renown. But, largely because of the economic situation, this did not last. During the 1970s, talented Canadian film makers, in full production, were suddenly hit by economic recession. While some were able to continue, others simply abandoned the cause.

The Canadian government attempted to counter the situation by introducing a system of tax relief to encourage investment in Canadian productions. There was much film activity, and many foreigners came to make films in Canada. But the quality of the final product often left something to be desired, and few important roles were given to Canadian artists or technicians. The federal government terminated this program in 1978 and changed its film production policy, demanding, among other things, more Canadian content. In addition, Canada now had joint production agreements with other countries. While fewer films have been made



*Mon oncle Antoine, 1970*

*The Grey Fox, 1982*







*The Rowdyman, 1971*

*Les Plouffe, 1981*



by private companies since 1978, those that have correspond more to Canadian reality.

Many problems still exist regarding to the development and distribution of Canadian films; the large American companies still have a monopoly, but the situation is gradually improving. In 1983, the Quebec government passed a cinema act regulating distribution and giving priority to French versions in the cinemas. Also, the Canadian government is expected to announce improved policies soon.

*J. A. Martin, photographe, 1977*



## **The Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC)**

In March 1967 the Canadian government passed a bill that created the Canadian Film Development Corporation, which became operational in 1968.

Professional film makers had long been asking the federal government to intervene and to help their failing industry. The CFDC was established to help in the financing of Canadian feature films, to give awards for films and scholarships to artists, and finally, to advise and assist the producers of feature films in the areas of production and distribution. As well as giving funds, the CFDC also takes a share of the profits of films and charges interest on the amounts loaned to producers.

The CFDC had an initial fund of \$10 million. Further sums have been allocated regularly and, in 1983, it received \$35 million to invest in Canadian broadcasts for the new pay television chains that began operating in February 1983.

### *Assistance to film makers*

Film makers receive financial assistance from a few organizations other than the CFDC. At the federal level, the Canada Council provides scholarships to film makers to allow them to work on a film project, to develop their abilities or to travel. The Ontario Arts Council performs the same task at the provincial level.

The Institut québécois du cinéma is somewhat different. Formed in 1976 by the Quebec government in response to the considerable pressure being applied by film makers, the institute invests money in film production. Its purpose is to promote the distribution of Quebec films in Canada and abroad. It can assist theatre operators in construction or renovation. Finally, through a development fund, it can assist film makers in activities that do not fall under financing categories.

### *The Department of Communications Film Festivals Bureau*

This brochure would not be complete without mention of the Film Festivals Bureau. Its purpose is to promote and to enhance Canadian cinema and film makers, which it does in several ways. Every year it enables producers





*Pour la suite du monde/Moontrap, 1963*

to register in more than international 100 film festivals or similar events. It also provides cultural and commercial representation for Canadian cinema at all major film events, grouping various government and private organizations under the Cinema Canada logo. Finally, the Film Festivals Bureau administers a grant program for film festivals taking place in Canada, although it is not involved in organizing or programming them.

### *Conclusion*

While the Canadian film industry is still developing, it is evident that the new talent steadily joining the ranks of the recognized film makers will ensure its continuing growth and success.

An opportunity to view Canadian productions should not be missed — the discovery of their value will be worth the trouble.

## APPENDIX

### Partial list of Canadian feature films since 1970

Productions	Director	Year
affaire Coffin (L')	Jean-Claude Labrecque	1980
Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (The)	Ted Kotcheff	1974
Atlantic City, USA	Louis Malle	1980
Bar Salon	André Forcier	1974
Between Friends	Donald Shebib	1973
Bingo	Jean-Claude Lord	1973
Bonheur d'occasion	Claude Fournier	1983
Bons débarras (Les)	Francis Mankiewicz	1980
Ça peut pas être l'hiver, on n'a même pas eu d'été	Louise Carré	1980
Comme les six doigts de la main	André Mélançon	1978
Fan's Note (A)	Eric Till	1972
Fantastica	Gilles Carle	1980
Fish Hawk	Donald Shebib	1979
Fleurs sauvages (Les)	Jean Pierre Lefebvre	1982
Goin' Down the Road	Donald Shebib	1970
Grey Fox (The)	Philip Borsos	1982
Guerre du Feu (La)	Jean-Jacques Annaud	1981
Heavy Metal	Gérald Potterton	1981
Heartaches	Donald Shebib	1981
Homme à tout faire (L')	Micheline Lanctôt	1980
Il était une fois dans l'Est	André Brassard	1974
J.A. Martin, photographe	Jean Beaudin	1977
Journey	Paul Almond	1972
Kamouraska	Claude Jutra	1973
Lies My Father Told Me	Jan Kadar	1975
Lucky Star (The)	Max Fischer	1980
Maria Chapdelaine	Gilles Carle	1983
Mon oncle Antoine	Claude Jutra	1974
Mort d'un bûcheron (La)	Gilles Carle	1973
Mourir à tue-tête	Anne-Claire Poirier	1979
One Man	Robin Spry	1977
Ordres (Les)	Michel Brault	1975
Paperback Hero	Peter Pearson	1973
Partners	Donald Owen	1976
Plouffe (Les)	Gilles Carle	1981
Porky's	Bob Clark	1982
Réjeanne Padovani	Denys Arcand	1972
Rowdyman (The)	Peter Carter	1971
Scanners	David Cronenberg	1980
Silent Partner (The)	Daryl Duke	1978
Threshold	Richard Pearce	1981
Ticket to Heaven	Ralph L. Thomas	1981
Ti-Cul Tougas	Jean-Guy Noël	1975
Vautours (Les)	Jean-Claude Labrecque	1975
Vieux pays où Rimbaud et mort (Le)	Jean-Pierre Lefebvre	1977
Vraie nature de Bernadette (La)	Gilles Carle	1972
Wedding in White	William Fruet	1973

Who Has Seen the Wind  
Why Rock the Boat?  
Why Shoot the Teacher?

Allan Winton King  
John Howe  
Silvio Narrizano

1978  
1975  
1977





*Les bons débarras, 1980*

*Who Has Seen the Wind, 1978*







*Au clair de la lune, 1983*





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